

## Noble Eight- Fold Path = Ariyo Aṭṭhangiko Maggo

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In early Buddhist scriptures the Pali word used to designate the way leading to the termination of Samsāric **dukkha** [*dukkha-nirodha-gāmanī-paṭipadā*] and the consequent attainment of the desired religious goal of Nibbana is **magga** [*ayam 'eva ariyo aṭṭhangiko maggo*]. This is also referred to as the **Middle Way** discovered by the Buddha himself: **majjhimā paṭipadā tathāgatena abhisambuddhā**. [For all these references see Dhammacakkappavattana Suttanta at Samyutta V. 420 ff. and Vin. I. 10 ff. PTS.].

This immediately implies two major points. 1. That the way to Nibbāna is a path to be trodden individually by each one for himself or herself. 2. That it also implies journeying from one specific starting point in life to another end point which is qualitatively very different and far removed from the starting one, implying a tremendous change of one's personal character.

Now it should be clear from what has been said so far that journeying on the spiritual path of Buddhism implies and involves a tremendous amount of spiritual culture within an individual which has to be brought about essentially by oneself, **without assistance from outside**. Buddhism rejects the idea of grace from an external source of divine power in its liberation process [*attāno loko* - Ratṭhapāla Sutt at MN. II. 68].

The basic word which pertains to this culture in Buddhism is **sikkhā**. The verbal form of it in Pali **sikkhati** [intransitive verb] means to train or discipline oneself, to nurture or **bring about a growth**. [Its causative form **sikkhāpeti** means to 'discipline or train another.']. In Buddhism, **sikkhā** is a concept of very high prestige. The entire process of monastic development which is calculated to lead to Nibbāna is viewed as **sikkhā**. He who abandons his monastic life is said to abandon his **sikkhā** [*sikkham paccakkhāya*].

This entire Buddhist training process, from the preliminary initiation into the religion [*āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ*] up to the acquisition of wisdom [*paññā*] for the final release or *vimutti* in Nibbāna comes under this broadest-ever concept of **three-fold culture** of *sikkhattaya* or *tisso sikkhā*. The three divisions which successively follow one another are 1. moral rectitude [*sīla* or *adhisīla-sikkhā*], 2. development or culture of the mind [*samādhī* or *adhicitta-sikkhā*] and 3. resultant wisdom [*paññā* or *adhipaññā-sikkhā*].

No student of Buddhism should fail to notice here the very early attempt made to clarify the relative relationship of the total culture implied in the *tisso sikkhā* to the circumscribed partial development provided by the Noble Eightfold Path which leads only up to *sammā samādhī* or correct culture of the mind, with wisdom or *sammā ñāṇa* [i.e. *paññā*] lying well outside the Path as number nine [See Janavasabha and Mahācattārīsaka Suttas at DN. II.216 f. and MN. III. 76 respectively.]. This relationship is more precisely and emphatically stated in the Cullavedalla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN.I.301] where Therī Dhammadinnā who is highly esteemed by the Buddha for her competence in the Dhamma tells her erstwhile husband Visākha that while the three-fold culture [referred to here as the three *khandhas*] can contain the Eight-fold Path within it, the Eight-fold Path cannot contain the three *khandhas* [loc. cit.]

A clear grasp of the structural pattern of the Eight-fold Path and a much clearer understanding of the import of its eight different items from *sammā dīṭṭhi* to *sammā samādhī* should convince any student of Buddhism with an open mind that the Path is made up of successive stages, each preceding one leading to the latter. Note the repeated indication of this in the phraseology *sammā dīṭṭhissa sammā saṅkappo pahotī* etc. etc. which occur regularly in the Janavasabha and Mahācattārīsaka Suttas referred to earlier [DN. II. 216f. and MN. III.76]. We fail to see how it could be maintained that these items are concurrent, no matter who says it or whichever later tradition upholds it. The position of the Suttas on this, as we have already indicated, is one of successive development through gradual

stages.

On the other hand, if one wishes to discern any distinct stages in the development through the Path, it is our belief that the evidence of the Suttas themselves make it possible. Buddhism comes on the scene as a new faith and a new creed. Those who have not hitherto been Buddhists or known Buddhism have to make a start somewhere. **On hearing the teachings of the Buddha**, they gain some conviction with regard to its plausibility and veracity. This is referred to in the Suttas as gaining faith and trust in the Buddha and his teaching [*So taṃ dhammaṃ sutvā Tathāgate saddham paṭilabhati*. M. I. 179].

It is this **access to the new teaching** and **its acceptance** which makes an average worldling a **Buddhist by admission**. Therefore such a thing as a **Buddhist by birth** is no more than a mere nomenclature, good enough only for a passport requirement or census reckoning. **Being a Buddhist by birth** has no credibility or worth in the new creed. It is only at this **stage of corrected vision** of *sammā diṭṭhi* as the first stage of the Eight-fold Path that **the first step in the Buddhist way of religious life** is taken with all sincerity. Entry into the new religion is thereby well and truly guaranteed [*āgato imaṃ saddhammaṃ*]. One's faith in the new creed now is not fickle or flickering [*dhamme aveccappasādena samannāgato*]. The new convert's vision is precise and perfect [*ujugatā 'ssa diṭṭhi*]. All referemces in this paragraph are from the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. MN. I. 48].

With this entry into and membership of the chosen new faith guaranteed in this manner, it becomes invariably necessary to secure the correct thinking pattern [*sammā saṅkappa*] of the new convert as a Buddhist. Awareness of the Dhamma gained through the first stage of the Path, namely *sammā diṭṭhi* leads with ease to the restructuring of the thought pattern as befits the Buddhist [*sammā diṭṭhissa sammā saṅkappo pahoti*]. Without the former, one would not and we would say cannot, feel the need for or take possession of the latter. The three-fold *saṅkappa* are **essentially Buddhist ways of thinking**.

Behold the change. The newly structured **thinking pattern of the Buddhist**, i.e. **sammā saṅkappa** must begin with a reduction [**nekkhamma saṅkappa**] of the proneness to the gratification of sensory demands [**kāma saṅkappa**]. This is an undeniably vital requirement of Buddhist thinking and Buddhist living, whether one likes it or not. There is no bargaining about it with the Buddha. All religious goodness in Buddhism must lead in this direction of **viveka-nissitam** [= directed towards **non-delighting in** sensory gratification] and **virāga-nissitam** [= directed towards detachment]. To this broad category of **saṅkappa** are added two more items which have to be basic to Buddhist patterns of thinking. They are 1. **non-hostility** or non-conflict among persons [**avyāpāda saṅkappa**], and 2. **non-injury** [**avihimsā saṅkappa**].

These three items of thought restructuring roughly fall into two areas of moral and ethical reform, namely individual and social. Both are indispensably connected with the qualitative improvement of an individual in his journeying towards the aspired goal of Nibbana. Behaviour of individuals in society are primarily founded on these. They are the very bases of corrected **moral good living**.

As individuals, how much control have we over gratifying our sensory stimuli. In our response to sensory stimuli? How much of our behaviour is corrosive on ourselves on the one hand and how much on the rest of the community in whose midst we live, on the other? This area is covered under **nekkhamma saṅkappa** whose main concern is the **regulation** of the **individual's sensory gratification**.

The other two **saṅkappas** of **avyāpāda** and **avihimsā** have essentially societal dimensions of concern for everybody else besides oneself. If these were consciously corrected, one is automatically on the threshold of **mettā bhāvanā** of developing amity and friendship. The Buddha tells his son Rāhula in the Mahārāhulovāda Sutta that as one develops **mettā**, hostility or **vyāpāda** recedes and in the development of **karuṇā**, injury or **vihimsā** would very naturally recede [MN. I. 424].

After the careful probe we have made into these two items of *sammā diṭṭhi* and *sammā sarikappa* as items 1 and 2 of the Eight-fold Path, we are very much impressed with their preparatory character **in making Buddhists out of new recruits, with a true hall mark of identity**. These two items of No. 1 and No. 2, we are compelled to believe, are pre-requisites with an unmistakable Nibbānic orientation. We would therefore place them together in a class by themselves, as necessarily preparing **the true basis of Buddhistness at a very down to earth level**, within the reach of every human, with a true religious awareness.

It is interesting to note how Nos. 3, 4 and 5 of the Eight-fold Path now turn out to be **prescriptive injunctions**, regulating the the lives of humans so that all life on earth including man, bird and beast continues to live, without causing any disturbance to the entire ecosystem to which we have to harmoniously belong. Nos. 1 and 2 by their wholesome vision [*sammā diṭṭhi*] and benevolent attitudes [*sammā sarikappa*] have groomed the Buddhists for life in the world. They cover the areas of *sammā vācā* [corrected speech], *sammā kammanto* [corrected activity] and *sammā ājīvo* [corrected forms of livelihood] which do not interfere with the biota or the living world outside. The entire domain of *sīla* or moral good living seems to be covered under these three items.

At this stage in the life of a Buddhist lay person, man or woman, we have no difficulty in assuming that he or she has nearly perfected the territory of *sīla*. Good living in terms of word and deed are vouchsafed under the *pañcasīla* [under items 3, 4 and 5 of the Path.]. Item No. 6 of the Path, namey *sammā vāyāmo* now sets about on the task of self-detection and self-correction. This, we would consider to be the commencement of the stage of *citta sikkhā* or *samādhi bhāvanā*. We begin here with item No. 6 of the Path, namely *sammā vāyāma* when one turns in the direction of one's inner self, or turns attention to the working of one's own mind. Arising of disruptive, corrosive thoughts [*akusalā dhammā*] must be prevented, and the mind must be cleared of evil thoughts which have already found their way in. In the same way, one is required to

endeavour for the furtherance of one's wholesome thoughts or *kusalā dhammā*.

This is the role of noble endeavour or *sammā vāyāma* of the Path. A highly spoken of virtue in this connection is *jāgariya* or wakefulness. It is none other than one's mental alertness or wakefulness. One is expected to achieve this on a daily basis, at least once during the three- period night: *tinnaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ paṭijaggeyya paṇḍito*. [Dhp. v. 157]. This is the unmistakable injunction about ethical or moral self-examination, to be undertaken on a daily basis, by every wise person, man, woman or child.

It is more than unfortunate that the Commentarial tradition as adopted by the Sri Lankans [and in Mien mar] has mistaken this time division of *tinnaṃ aññataraṃ yāmaṃ* as referring to childhood, adolescence and old age of a human and thereafter has started making a request to people to collect merit during any one of these periods. We are sorry that this is the lowest-ever descent to which this wonderfully vibrant piece of Dhamma teaching could have ever dropped. It is time our wiser monks and laymen, whoever there be, correct this mistake and retrieve the vibrancy of the original teaching.

Many Sutta references insist that after acquiring a degree of concentration and command over one's mind [*āṇāpāṇsati-samādhi bhāvitā bahulīkatā*] one should be able thereby to cleanse one's mind of impurities that have arisen within it [*uppanne uppanne pāpake akusale dhamme antaradhāpeti vūpasametī*. SN.]. This is the gradual utilization of mind-culture, stage by stage, in the process of journeying towards the goal of Nirvana. This item No.6 of *sammā vāyāmo* or **Right Endeavour** of the Path is the cleansing process of purification of one's mind. Note that a great deal of awareness and judgement with regard to *kusala* and *akusala* come into play here. One acquires at this stage the necessary energy, methodology and the training for the purpose. Thus *sammā vāyāmo* certainly is not the energy and ability to engage oneself in a great deal of productive household activity,

As we get to No. 7 or *sammā sati* of the Path, we cannot fail to be impressed by the essentially Buddhist character of the attitudes we are called upon to develop as we aspire to reach the goal of Nirvana. It is these and these alone which bring about the necessary detachment, i.e. *virāga* and *vossagga*, needed for the attainment of *samādhi* from which position alone we are enabled to acquire the necessary final wisdom. This *sammā sati* of the Path, it must be clearly remembered, is different and distinct from the mindfulness required of an average worldling to prevent a cup from being hit on the tap while being washed. In these situations, mindfulness and awareness [*sati* and *sampajañña*] operate at a very down-to-earth level of day-to-day activities, guaranteeing only a mental steadiness and alertness, like the alertness and awareness one has to possess even while being in the toilet [*uccāra-passāvakamme sampajānakārī hoti*].

On the other hand, a more specific mindfulness of a truly religious nature has to step in here at this stage. An individual's Samsāra-involvement being relative to our reaction to the world we live in [that we are blissfully ignorant about the true nature of the world = *avijjā-nivaraṇanam sattānam*] and that we are caught up in the snares of greed [*taṇhā-sañyojanānam*], we need to be constantly at work towards a reduction and a total elimination of both these failings.

Therefore we are rightly told that the role of *sammā sati* is the total development of the Fourfold Bases of Mindfulness [*cattāro satipatṭhānā*]. See where we begin. It is at the correct reflection on the nature of our physical body [*kāye kāyānupassī* at DN.II. 291f.]. Of the conventional *nāma* + *rūpa* composition of the human being [*sabbaso nāmarūpasmim yassa natthi mamāyitam*], *rūpa* is our gross physical body which can be arrived at through several of our sense organs. Many are the adjectives which we can apply to it, which if we do with sense and judgement, we can develop a true sense of detachment [*virāga*] from our physical body to which we are so banefully attached, both in good health and much more perilously in ill health. A true sense of *kāyānupassanā* should help us develop that much needed sense of abandonment [*vossagga*].

Moving now over to the *nāma* or **psychic component** of our selves we begin with the study of *vedanā* or our sensory reactions to the world we live in. Our sense organs provide us with continuous feedback of pleasure, pain and neutral feelings [*sukha*, *dukkha* and *adukkhamasukha*]. If we react by way of clinging on to or grasping at them, we incur the evil result of prolonging our *samsaric* continuance and if we do not grasp at them, the opposite result of *samsāric* reduction [*anissito ca viharati na ca kiñci loke upādiyati*]. This sensory reaction, ill or well done, is merely an outcome of the phenomenon of existence [*yāvadeva nāṇamattāya patissatimattāya*].

The culture of the four *satipaṭṭhānā* seem to take the disciple almost through the entire range of mind culture or *adhicitta-sikkhā* [*samādhī*], i.e. stage 2 of the three-fold *tisso sikkhā* required in Buddhism, prior to the acquisition of *paññā*. The Cullavedalla Sutta refers to the four *satipaṭṭhānā* as the initial flowering of *samādhī* [*samādhī nimitta*]. On the conclusion of the fourth *satipaṭṭhāna* item of *dhammesu dhammānupaassī*, the disciple is said to be either fully enlightened or in the state of *anāgāmitā*. We would therefore infer that the achievements of the state of *sammā samādhī* would invariably be included within the *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*.

Both the Janavasabha and Mahācattārīsaka Suttas would tell us that on the attainment of the eighth item of *sammā samādhī* of the Path, the next item for the Ariyan disciple to move over to would be the derivative one of the state of wisdom or *saammā ñāṇa* [*sammā samādhissa sammā ñāṇaṃ pahoti*. Here *ñāṇaṃ* is equal to *paññā*]. Both suttas quoted above clearly show us that the Path or *magga* [*paṭipadā*] has a very specific role to play in taking the average non-Buddhist lay person on the path to liberation and leaving him at the doorstep of Nibbāna, leaving *paññā* to open its doors to him. Role of *ñāṇa* fulfilled, *vimutti* as the invariable release in Nibbāna ensues [*sammā ñāṇassa sammā vimutti pahoti*].